

Coping with New Words When Reading

By Shirley Bricout

In France, the purpose of one part of the final exam is to see how well students can deal with words in a new context, grasp the general meaning of a text before going into detail, and infer the meaning of new words. Most students are intimidated by this section. Some stop reading when they come across more than three new words. So, to help them overcome this problem, I have given them techniques to cope with new words in texts.

An Activity

Throughout the year, the students have the opportunity to read texts from different sources, like newspaper articles, novels, short stories, and essays. This exposes them to a wide variety of styles and topics. Within each category, I choose excerpts in which most of the vocabulary is new. For example, when we studied *The Sussex Vampire* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, I chose the description of the house where a mysterious attack had taken place. (A young Peruvian mother is accused of wanting to kill her baby in a vampirelike manner.)

From this passage I created an exercise focusing on three main goals: how to build an understanding of the text in spite of new words; how to cope with new words; and how to build confidence. Students were told to cross out those words that were new or not well-known. They were then asked to discuss the text, focusing on the goals mentioned above.

Building an understanding:

I started by handing out copies of the text with some words missing. The students were asked to read through it, setting aside the missing words. The students noticed the narrowing down of the description to details and readily inferred which were the key words in the text. In this way they were able to make a distinction between what could be understood in general and what had to be understood in detail.

Coping with new words:

Working in pairs, the class was asked to fill in the missing words. They could use their imaginations, but had to select the most logical terms. In doing this, the students had to identify the functions and natures of the missing words, and formulate questions as to whether the words were verbs, adjectives, nouns and so forth. This led to interesting discussions. Many times the students disagreed about whether they had to find a noun or a second adjective.

Their awareness of grammatical needs became more acute. For example, having to choose an adjective with more than two syllables after the word most seemed necessary. In some cases the actual word was found, while in others, the meaning was close enough. Some students had precise ideas conjured up by the context, but could not express them in English. They resorted to the question: "What is the English word for...?" The word was given either by another student or by the teacher.

The next step was to examine whether the text made sense with the words that they had supplied. The teacher's role is to encourage the students to imagine and to anticipate what the author could have written. For instance, in finding one word, a long discussion ensued about the different objects a Peruvian woman could bring to England. These objects had to make up a collection.

Building confidence:

The students were then given the list of missing words, but not in the correct order. This way the class became more familiar with the new vocabulary, and they could study the roots of the words and associate them with those they had chosen. Discovering that their guesses were quite close encouraged students to use this method. As follow up work, I gave students special vocabulary exercises using these new words.

Assessment of This Method

Since the students were expected to make this technique their own, they were asked to evaluate it. Most of the students found that once they had gained enough confidence, they preferred not to deal with blank spaces, but with the original text. They felt that the aspect or sonority of the words also conveyed ideas and stimulated their imaginations. This was the aim of the method.

Conclusion

In most texts, students have to cope with words they have not seen before or have forgotten. A technique that encourages students to be active and bring their own contributions to the lesson, builds confidence. Once they have developed enough confidence, they can begin to read and understand original texts successfully.

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